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# **\*\*BO TALES\*\***

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Vol.3 No.3

The Newsletter of the Original Hobo Nickel Society

October 1994

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## **"TALK ABOUT A WHITE ELEPHANT!"**

By Bill Fivaz

A few years ago, I received a letter and coin from a dealer in the midwest that, you might say, got my attention.

It was a hobo nickel, not exceptionally well done, but acceptable, and as Harry Cary would say... **"HOLLY COW!"** Look what it's carved on! The piece had been certified by ANACS on a photo certification, and described as: **"OBV REENGRAVED - DAMAGED - EDGE FILLED"**, and it's on a high-end VF **1918/7-D OVERDATE!**

The price the dealer was asking was considerable... somewhere around \$1500, as I recall, which is about as "white elephant-ish" as you can get! A regular collector would pass on the piece because it was "damaged", and wouldn't fit a regular Buffalo set. A hobo nickel collector wouldn't want to pay the numismatic value of the coin just to buy it as a Hobo Nickel. Where's the middle ground? I don't know... possibly somewhere around \$250 - 300?

I didn't buy the coin, and I don't know if it was ever sold; if anyone has this piece, I'd be interested to learn of its whereabouts, only to know that it is still alive and well. "Peanuts, anyone?"



**1918/7-D Hobo Nickel**

### **IN THIS ISSUE...**

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The next issue of **Bo Tales** will be sent in the latter part of January and will include the results of the OHNS auction, which will take place at the FUN show in Orlando. Fivaz will be sending the auction catalog to all paidup members of the club late in October. If your address label has your member number highlighted in yellow, then your membership is up for renewal. Use the renewal form on the last page. We do not want to lose you!

**John "Trapper" Kleis**, one of our two honorary life members and a well-known numismatist from Michigan is recovering from a heart attack. Trapper, please get well, we all love ya!

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Fall 1994

Dallas "Colonel" Shaw

As the summer winds down, we can look back and see that a lot has occurred. For starters, a number of our more fortunate members were able to attend the ANA's 26th Annual Summer Conference held in Colorado Springs. Unfortunately, I was not among your number. But, from all the reports that I've received, the conference lived up to its reputation as a first class numismatic educational experience with attendees having the unique experience of meeting and learning from some of the best numismatists in the business, as well as renewing old acquaintances and making many new ones.

Speaking of the ANA, wasn't the ANA Convention in Detroit quite an experience? During the time that I was there, the bourse was crowded and people seemed in a mood to buy. A lot of money was seen changing hands. There was truly something for everyone. During my tour of the bourse, I saw coins ranging in price from a few dollars to a million five (a spectacular Chain Cent in SP-67). Unfortunately, the one thing that I did not find was some reasonably priced original hobo nickels. By the time I arrived on the scene (Saturday), I was only able to locate one dealer with a selection on hand. His prices of well over a hundred dollars a piece reflected a warped sense of the current value and popularity of some fairly average pieces. So, I passed--and, if you came upon the same dealer, I hope that you did too. It seems as though as our hobos gain in popularity, a lot of johnny come lately's want to jump on the bandwagon and cash in. There is a lot of wisdom in that old saw, Caveat emptor, "Let the buyer beware."

The highlight of the ANA Convention, for me, was our own society table that was set up by Gail Kraljevich and Bill Fivaz. Again, we own these two a special vote of thanks. We are truly blessed having them in our midst. A lot of hard work went into setting up a first class table. Consequently, there were a number of visitors to the table and a lot of Bo Tales were passed out. Hopefully, we picked up some new members. In my last column, I promised you that some dynamite hobos would be on display. If you did make it to our table, you found that promise kept. The table had on display the 30 lots of original hobo nickels that Bill plans to auction at FUN Convention during our membership meeting. All of the pieces are superb, so much so that I was surprised that Bill was willing to part with carvings of such high quality. If you were fortunate to see them, you know what I mean. The society is really fortunate to have a member willing to share with others to the degree that Bill is. So, start putting some money away in the sock so that you can bid on one or more of these super coins during FUN 95.

I recently received a tip from Bill Fivaz regarding the existence of the National Hobo Association, Inc. I had never heard of them, but I figured with a name like that, they had to have something interesting to offer. So, I invested \$40.00 in a three year membership, thereby saving five bucks over the annual rate. I was not disappointed. In short order, I received a copy of the Hobo Times, their official publication. This is a first class magazine in color that is dedicated to publicizing and commemorating past and current "Knights of the Road"--yes, there are still hobos out there riding the rails. Let's hope we can interest them in taking up carving. I found the magazine down right fascinating and very hard to put down. If you're interested, you can contact the National Hobo Association at P.O. Box 706, Nisswa, MN 56468. Dues are \$10.00 per year or \$40.00 for three years.

Our hard working editor has informed me that the well has run dry in terms of articles for publication. We truly need your help. If you don't feel up to writing a full blown article, how about something short, such as sharing some info on your latest hobo find with fellow members? The one thing that we are all interested in is who is finding what.

January seems a long way off, but it will be here before we know it. So, make your plans now to attend the FUN gala 40th Anniversary Convention scheduled for January 5-8, 1995. The hard-working FUN Board has spared no effort in order to insure that your stay is a memorable one. There will be plenty of hotel space adjacent to the Convention Center in the Clarion and Peabody hotels and the Quality Inn Plaza. Mention FUN 95 when you make reservations and you'll receive a special convention rate. I have set up our annual meeting for Saturday, January 7th at 10:30 a.m. Our Board of Directors meeting will be at 3:00 p.m. on the same day and you are invited to attend that meeting as well.

Speaking of FUN 95, I would be remiss if I did not mention the magnanimity and generosity of Auctions by Bowers and Merena, Inc. Even though this firm is the official auctioneer for FUN 95, they graciously consented to our request to allow Bill Fivaz's auction of 30 hobo nickels during our annual meeting. This is just another indication as to why they are considered leaders in the hobby and a friend of the collector.

Happy hunting! See you out and about.

## HOW CAN I TELL THE DIFFERENCE....

by Gail "Bo-ette" Kraljevic CLM #3



Hobo nickels are Buffalo nickels that have had the likeness of either the Indian (obverse) or Buffalo (reverse) modified so that it represents a different design. Each of the original Hobo Nickels, sculpt before the Happy Days of the 50's and 60's, is unique. They were hand carved by wanderers and wayfarers and traded for a meal, a place to sleep, or a ride to the next adventure. These delightful pieces of art and history, the objects of our coin show pursuits, the nemesis of our bank accounts, can be difficult and frustrating to acquire - but certainly not impossible.

One of the most commonly asked question is: "How can I tell the difference between an original and a modern hobo nickel?" I answer that the secret lies in viewing many examples - a feat that is difficult when just starting out. The authentication series that is currently running in this newsletter is an excellent start.

Many of the artists today are (unfortunately) copying coins that were pictured in Del Romines' book on Hobo Nickels published by Lonesome John Publishing in 1982, now out of print and almost impossible to find. The following side by side comparisons of original and modern (or neo-bo) coins should help to show the differences.

Before I delve into the comparisons, I would like to introduce the artists:

### GEORGE WASHINGTON "BO" HUGHES

Most of the original hobo nickel artists' identities are unknown; George Washington "Bo" Hughes is an exception. "Bo" was the youngest of ten or eleven children, the son of a freed slave. He was born around the turn of the century and went "on the bum" about 1915. He was a true hobo from the time he left home right up to the time he disappeared in the early 1980's, hopping train after train, going from one adventure to another. He learned the art of nickel

carving from his friend, mentor, and fellow hobo, Bertram "Bert" Wiegand, and sold his first nickels around the time of the First World War. Today his nickels are highly prized, and sought after by collectors.

"Bo" was a prolific carver, and had a wide range of subjects, some more common than others. He carved both the obverse (clowns, Indians, other hoboes and acquaintances, jockeys, presidents, and self portraits) or the reverse (donkeys, elephants, hoboes with sacks on their backs, and turtles) and occasionally carved both. His nickels differ in artistic quality. His earlier ones are harder to find, are more interesting historically and have more subject variety, but are not as good artistically as those of his more productive "cameo" era in 1950 and 1951. His later ones - those done after a 1957 hand injury - can be quite primitive yet charming, simple and still desirable. They are probably also the most common - if indeed any of "Bo's" work can be called common!

In the early years, "Bo" toned his coins by carrying them in a tobacco tin and they have a beautiful golden brown color to them. Since these toned coins were more desirable, and sold more readily, he tried to find a way to quicken the process. Unfortunately, some of the methods used have left the coins today with ugly black splotches.

All of "Bo's" work was done with hand tools, chisels, gravers and knives. He only occasionally signed or dated his work in the early years, but regularly placed his initials and the date, "G.W.H. 50," for example, under the neck on his cameos. Some of his later coins have "G.W." off to the side, and Bill Fivaz owns one that was signed "Bo." Even though "Bo's" later coins were carved after the heyday of the hobo, all of his coins are considered "original" because "Bo" carved continuously from his early days "on the bum" right up to the time he disappeared from a hobo jungle in Florida.

During "Bo's" life his coins sold for less than we would pay today for a worn buffalo nickel. What do you think he would say if he could see the prices they are bringing now? Recent sales have brought from \$125.00 for a simple post hand injury punched type to \$750.00 for a magnificent cameo with pushed and raised metal. He was truly a master of this art.

#### FRANK BRAZZELL

Frank Brazzell, dealing as Brazzell Engraving is from Terre Haute, Indiana and is member R-96 of the Original Hobo Nickel Society. He specializes in elongated cents and also engraves love tokens. I met and spoke with Frank at the 1993 A.N.A. Convention in Baltimore, Maryland. He told me that he makes about 4000 modern hobo nickels a year. He uses a hand held power driven graver, does two at a time - in from 5 to 10 minutes. Most of his designs are copies of coins done by George Washington "Bo" Hughes that were featured in Romines' book. Frank does not sign or date his coins. He sells them wholesale for \$4.00 each (quantity price), and they can be bought at most of the shows for \$5.00 to \$10.00 each. They are attractive and relatively well done.

#### J. ALLEN

Ms. J. "Happy Hobo" Allen, O.H.N.S. member #18, is from Rochester, New York. She is responsible for bringing several new members into our club, and has brought some valuable



recommendations to the board. Although I have never met Ms. Allen, I have spoken to her on the phone. Her modern coins are made with a hand held power graver that she learned to use at an educational seminar that the company that makes the tool offered. She prefers to call her coins "hand made," because the tool is held in the hand, however, all of the work is done with the power tool. To her credit, Ms. Allen stamps her name on all of her coins, and, for the most part, does not copy original designs. Her coins are priced about the same as Brazzel's, are readily available at shows, and come in a wide variety of subjects.

#### JOHN DORUSA

John Dorusa, deceased, was a coal miner from upstate Pennsylvania. It is unclear when he began to carve coins, or if all his coins are modern. In letters that Dorusa wrote to Mary Travis, RM #143, of Davis, California, in the early 1980's, he stated that he was taught to carve at an Indiana farmer's market in the 1920's by "Bert, the hobo," who was a friend of "Bo." He says that they were both black (the "Bert" in Romine's book was white, "Bo" was black), and that "Bert" was "as mean as they come" (a direct quote from one of Romines' articles). He writes "...I had 10 brothers and sisters ...started out young, about 14 years old when I went out on my own" ...a parallel life to "Bo's"?

I believe that Dorusa may have embellished the truth, with a lot of help from the information in Romines' book and published articles, to make his nickels more desirable. I can find no proof that any of his nickels were carved prior to the 1980's. I would welcome information that any reader may have on this subject. *If anyone knows of the existence of a Dorusa carved coin acquired before 1980, please let me know!*

John Dorusa copied many of the designs from "Bo" and "Bert," as shown in the Romines' book. Again quoting from one of his letters "...as I have hundreds of styles in stock. I have about everything in the Del Romines' book and hundreds more." He even "signed" some of his copies "G.H." or "Bo." Romines contacted Dorusa in the mid 1980's and asked him to please use his own initials or name, and many of his later works are signed "J.D.," "J.H.D.," or "J. Dorusa." Most of these "signatures" were added at a later date, with a power graver.

He also carved sets. The "Presidents" set has 39 coins depicting the first 40 presidents - from Washington to Reagan. (Do you remember which president is counted twice, and why?) The "Apostle" set has 13 coins - Christ and his 12 Apostles, from a painting of the last supper by "Zabateri." All of these coins (except Christ) are numbered between the legs of the buffalo on the reverse, from 1 to 40 for the presidents (the Grover Cleveland has two numbers - 22 and 24) and 1 to 12 for the Apostles.

John Dorusa's nickels are, for the most part, very good. They appear to me to be done with a combination of hand gravers, hammer and curved chisels, and power tools. Del Romines believes they are all done with a single curved chisel and a power tool. The quality does vary quite a bit, probably going down hill as Dorusa got up in years. He was a prolific carver, and thousands of his nickels exist. They sell today for about \$15.00 to \$25.00 each, and can be found fairly easily, although the supply is quickly drying up.

#### RON LANDIS

Ron Landis, RM #105, is from Eureka Springs, Arkansas, and is chief engraver for the Gallery Mint. He is a modern engraver of the highest quality. Ron attended the A.N.A. Summer Seminar in 1993 on a full scholarship from the Gilroy Roberts Foundation to study engraving under Virginia Jansen. While there, he met Bill Fivaz - CLM #1, and saw Bill's presentation on hobo nickels. The rest is history. To date Ron has carved over 50 nickels and several other coins - each one better than the one before. He has been commissioned to do several portraits and their quality is outstanding! His work is done completely by hand, using no power tools, and can take from 4 hours to 4 days, depending on the detail. His pieces start around \$100.00, with his commissioned portraits selling for considerably more.

All of Ron Landis' creations are signed "R.L." and are consecutively numbered and dated. Most are one-of-a-kind, but he has agreed to duplicate a couple by special request, including one of Christ. I was fortunate enough to acquire the original, but when Bill Fivaz and Virg Marshall (The Penny Merchant) saw it, they both HAD to have one! (Virg is a minister, and is married to hobo nickel enthusiast, Marilyn, RM #33.)

There are a couple of other modern carvers, but the ones that I have mentioned here are, to the best of my knowledge, the most noteworthy. I don't believe these people are trying to deceive anyone. Their prices are fair, and I am happy to buy coins from them. However, I do wish they would all sign or initial and date their work - and use their own designs.

Shown are four reverse carvings:



Carving #1



Carving #2

The first [ #1 ] is an original hobo nickel donkey by "Bo." Notice the rounded sculpting of the body and the use of the metal to create the ears and the nose. Excess design metal was removed around the new image. This coin was probably carved in the early 1940's.

The next picture [ #2 ] is another donkey - this one a modern reproduction by John Dorusa. His cuts are *into* the coin and *on top of* the design. The entire coin was buffed, and the

buffalo partially removed, *before* any design was started. This particular coin has both the reverse *and* the obverse altered. The obverse is a likeness of "Bo."

The third donkey [ #3 ], also a modern reproduction, is by Frank Brazzell. Frank also buffs the coin - removing the original design - before cutting the lines into the remaining metal. Notice how smooth the background is.



Carving #3



Carving #4

The last reverse carving [ #4 ] is by Ron Landis and is of a 1929 Model "A" Ford (on a 1929 nickel!) Notice the use of the back of the buffalo to create the trees. This coin was done in 1993.

Two by "Bo":

The first [ #5 ] is a magnificent "cameo" self portrait that was done in 1950. The detail in the hair is superior! Notice the fine lines used to create the ear, the nose, the eye and the beard. This one is signed and dated under the neck "G.W.H. 50." Truly the prize of my collection!

The next coin [ #6 ] is also by "Bo" and was done after his hand injury - probably in the early 1960's. All of the hair and beard are done with a circular punch. This coin exhibits the typical "Bo" nose that we see on all of his self portraits. The toning is very dark.

The next two modern coins were done by John Dorusa and are very typical of his style. The first [ #7 ] is a copy of the previous coin by "Bo." He even copied the "G H" initials. All of the beard and hair was done with a short curved chisel. The hat and collar has been done with a power tool. The nose has been slightly modified. You can tell that the coin was buffed before carving as the high spots (lettering, tip of the nose, head) have been uniformly leveled and appear lighter in the picture. **This is one of the diagnostics of a modern carving.**



**Carving #5**



**Carving #6**

The next Dorusa coin [ #8 ] is a copy of a "Bo" self portrait. Again, all the hair and the beard - even the ear - has been punched with a single curved chisel. It was turned one way, then another, to make the wavy appearance. The nose has been modified to resemble the "ski nose" that is "Bo's" trademark. Again notice the buffed appearance on the high points. John Dorusa placed his initials on the collar - his usual spot.



**Carving #7**



**Carving #8**



Frank Brazzell also copies the "Bo" self portrait as seen in picture [ #9 ]. At first this coin looks very similar to the Dorusa coin, but there are definite differences. Brazzell does not use a chisel, he uses a drill, therefore each line in the hair and beard are done with a single curved stroke. The features of the Indian have not been altered, just buffed down. The collar design seen here is very typical of Brazzell's work. There are no initials, or date.



**Carving #9**



**Carving #10**

Another modern Brazzell [ #10 ], shows either a Santa figure, or someone ready to go to bed. Again, all the lines in the hair and beard are single cuts with the drill. A close-up inspection of the lines shows fresh cut metal and sharp, squared slices. (Remember, if it looks like it was done yesterday - it probably was!) This gentleman does have an interesting mustache! The collar design is another very typical Brazzell design. This coin should sell for about \$5.00, and is available at almost every show.

The next two modern coins were done by Ms. J. Allen. The first, [ #11 ] is very similar to the previous one of Brazzell's - but this one I'm sure is a Santa figure. Ms. Allen uses what appears to be a combination of power punches (the circles) and a rotary file. Her cuts are coarser than either Dorusa or Brazzell and more varied in design. Notice the "texturing" of the cap to hide the Indian's hair. It looks as if something is rubbed on the finished product to darken or highlight the lines. This coin is stamped on the reverse "J. Allen."

The next Allen coin [ #12 ] is a man in a baseball cap (something we have not seen around here for awhile!). Compare the ears, the eyes and eye brows, and the mouths on the two Allen coins. Notice also the buffed appearance of the overall design.

The last picture [ #13 ] is of a modern coin done by Ron Landis shortly after his introduction to hobo nickels. It's hard to believe that this ornately clad warrior was once a stately Indian. Again, all of the design has been done without the use of any power tools. Landis used different kinds of gravers and files to achieve the desired effect. While this coin lacks the

historical significance of the original hobo nickels, it certainly has the artistic appeal!



Carving #11



Carving #12

Remember, when buying a coin, judge it on it's individual appeal *to you*. Look at the overall condition and the date of the coin. Original carvings *tend* to be on earlier date/ high grade coins, with as many as 50 to 75% on 1913 coins. The modern reproduction *tend* to be on later, low grade coins. Look at the art work. Is it fine and delicate, or course and crude? Is the subject a common one, or is it different with unusual details? Can you identify the carver? . . .or the subject on the coin? Is the price one that you can live with? And **DO YOU LIKE THE COIN?**



Carving #13

It is hoped that this mini crash course on hobo nickels has been both enjoyable and informative. Keep in mind that I have touched on only the coins by *known* artists. The majority of the original nickels are by unknown wanderers - and their stories will be forever locked into their designs.

Happy hunting!

Special Thanks To...

J.T. "Bubba" Stanton for the excellent photographs.

Bill "Zemo" Fivaz for advice, and help with the editing.

Del "Slickrock" Romines, author of Hobo Nickels, for information and inspiration.

# ORIGINAL HOBO NICKEL SOCIETY

## SUBMISSION FORM FOR REGISTRATION/CERTIFICATION

This certification service for Hobo Nickels and Hobo Carvings is provided for members and non-members of the Original Hobo Nickel Society. It is an independent opinion on the authenticity of any Hobo Carving on A U.S. Coin, specifically, if it is felt to be original (that is, carved during the 1913 - 1980 period). If determined to be a "Neo-Bo", produced recently (usually from 1981 to the present), the coin will not receive a registration number. All submissions, however, will receive a completed form and photo, and will receive a quality grade.

No refunds will be made.

PLEASE SUBMIT ONE COIN WITH EACH FORM TO:

Bill Fivaz  
P.O. Box 888660  
Dunwoody, GA 30356-0660

Owner's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: (Optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Owner's value of coin being submitted: (VALUE MUST BE DECLARED) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

OHNS Member? (circle one) Yes No Membership # \_\_\_\_\_

### Registration/Certification fee structure

(Please make all checks payable to: Original Hobo Nickel Society)

Members: \$15.00 per coin\*

Non-members: \$25.00 per coin\*

\*Includes postage and Insurance up to \$100.00. For coins valued over \$100.00 by the owner, please enclose sufficient funds for Insurance and Registration/Certification.

ALL SUBMISSIONS, WHETHER DEEMED TO BE "ORIGINAL" OR "NEO-BOS" (1981 TO PRESENT) WILL BE PHOTOGRAPHED AND REGISTERED (1), OR CERTIFIED (2).

(1) REGISTERED - Certified as an original (1913-1980) piece and assigned a registered number (with photo).

(2) CERTIFIED - Certified as a "Neo-bo" (1981 to present), but with no registered number (photo with form).

I understand that the opinion rendered by the examiner on my submission is strictly that, an opinion, and is not a guarantee that the item is genuine. It is however, the best considered judgement by qualified specialists in the area, but others may reach different conclusions.

No warranties are expressed or implied from any opinion rendered.

I authorize the OHNS to use a photograph of this coin and my name (name only, not address) in BO TALES or other club related areas if it so desires.

PHOTO

☐

YES

☐

NO

NAME

☐

YES

☐

NO

## OHNS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL FORM

\_\_\_\_\_ Please enroll me as a member in the Original Hobo Nickel Society, Inc. as indicated.

\_\_\_\_\_ Please renew my membership (member number \_\_\_\_\_) as indicated.

\_\_\_\_\_ Regular (@\$10 per year) \_\_\_\_\_ Life (\$150) \_\_\_\_\_ Youth under 19 (\$5)

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm enclosing an additional \$12, please send me the club tee-shirt size \_\_\_\_\_

I am also enclosing a donation of \_\_\_\_\_ for the OHNS YN Scholarship program

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ Moniker (Nickname): \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to abide by the Society's Code of Ethics.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Make checks payable to: **The Original Hobo Nickel Society**

Please send to OHNS Attention: "Bo-erte," PO Box 43, Malvern, PA 19355

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**\*\*BO TALES\*\***

The Newsletter of the...

**ORIGINAL HOBO NICKEL SOCIETY**

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